

FIRST DESERT MAGAZINE

For 534 issues it captured the heart of the Southwest desert

Desert Magazine, December 2005

By Ann Japenga

WHEN I MOVED TO PALM SPRINGS A DECADE AGO I discovered a box of old Desert magazines stashed under a display table at a now-defunct downtown bookshop. Figuring I should know something about my new home, I made a deal with the merchant and lugged the dusty box to my car.

It turned out to be a wise purchase. Those magazines from the 1950s became the guidebook for my desert life and provided hours of diversion. I'd pick up an issue at random and become happily engrossed in a story about a half-horse half-camel discovered in the desert or a personality profile of the sort of person most likely to be bitten by a Gila monster.

More than any book or scholarly study, the original Desert Magazine - headquartered in Palm Desert - captured the history and personality of the California desert. Few magazines can claim to have changed the Zeitgeist, but Desert did just that in its 534 issues published from 1937 to 1985.

University of Arizona professor Peter Wild says the magazine altered the way Americans view deserts - once thought of as throw-away terrain. "The magazine became a powerful force in reinforcing romantic attitudes toward the arid lands," he wrote in "Desert Magazine: The Henderson Years."

Today the Coachella Valley is known for passive pleasures - have a hot rock massage, drop a dollar in a slot machine, take a hummer tour. In contrast, the original Desert celebrated engagement with the land and discovery - of agates, lost mines and elephant trees. As Harold Weight put it in an article, it was "for those who love to seek." The magazine was the brainchild of newspaperman Randall Henderson, brother of Palm Desert founder Cliff Henderson. He and his friend J. Wilson McKenney were camping atop Santa Rosa peak one day in 1936. Surveying the expanse from Whitewater to the Salton Sea, the two were inspired to start a magazine that would highlight the history, archaeology, lore and inhabitants of deserts from California to Arizona, Nevada to New Mexico.

The two knew that Western magazines had a high mortality rate, but they some-how had landed on a wide-spread passion. "To tell you just what Desert Magazine means to me is not an easy thing to do in a few words," wrote M.S. Carpenter in a letter to the editor from Nutley, New Jersey. Similar sentiments poured in from all over. Desert Magazine had transcended its regional origins to become a thriving national force.

For writers, a story was never just an assignment; it was a quest. Edmund Jaeger motored out each weekend, making discoveries -such as the fact that poorwills hibernate - that would change the face of desert natural history. John Hilton followed the fossil and gem trails; Randall Henderson explored every known and unknown palm oasis in the region; Norton Allen drew maps that were worthy of framing. A skilled cartographer and artist, Allen had been in a major car accident. His spine was fused so that he could not sit down. Yet he managed to rig a specially equipped camper that allowed him to travel and make maps, sleeping upright at night.

Inflamed with the potential of the phenomenon he'd created, Henderson built a sprawling pueblo-style Desert Magazine headquarters on Highway III in Palm Desert. (The building today houses LG's Prime Steakhouse.) The circulation department was run by Evonne Riddell, Henderson's daughter who now lives in Palm Desert.

The editor aimed to create a colony with desert writers and artists living on the site. The plan never materialized, perhaps because Henderson was a loner who preferred interaction by mail to in-person encounters. Magazine co-founder J. Wilson McKenney once wrote: "He was not always an easy man to know."

Some fans of the early magazine grumbled when the Desert Magazine you are holding in your hands decided to adopt the name of the original. They said it was sacrilege to stamp the "Desert Magazine" brand on a glossy modern publication.

But I'm happy to see the name on the cover. If this magazine leads even a few readers to the original and then lures them out on the gem trails - the name adoption will be worthwhile.

As Randall Henderson wrote in his column "Just Between You and Me" in September, 1950: "Probably we will have more visitors than ever in the desert country this fall .. 'I hope these visitors will not spend all their time in the pampering environment of luxurious resorts. For it is in the secluded canyons and remote mountains that the medicine gods of the desert country hold their clinics."